

Justice

"... We heard that you recently got demoted from your position at Ace a few months after a whistle-blower exposed your involvement in unlawfully accessing the medical documents of the unnamed victim who was raped by the Ace driver in the cab she had hired. Is that true?" a vigilante young reporter, armed with a video camera, questioned Jahar Sen, darting toward the young man as soon as she had noticed him sneak out of Ace headquarters through the back door. He was trying to avoid other media persons at the front gate of the edifice. They were waiting to hound him over the latest Aniket Basu missing case.

"You're trespassing. Get out!" Jahar shouted at her, bustling away from the premises.

But the tenacious reporter pursued him around the piece of abandoned land, used by the local children as a playground, behind the Ace headquarters. "What action has Ace taken against the recruitment managers who have been hiring drivers without checking their criminal records?"

"No comment. You need to leave me alone, lady!"

"Has anyone from Ace met Aniket Basu's parents?"

"I have to drive to Kheerpur to go see my father now. Okay? Get lost or I'll take action against whoever you represent," he warned her firmly.

Within an hour or so, Jahar reached a reputable old-age home where his father was spending his last days. But, instead of going into his father's room to meet him, Jahar wandered about the building until his eyes fell on the cleaner, Shabana, dusting the furniture of one of the rooms whose occupant was an old man left bedridden by a couple of strokes. Shabana was initially alarmed by his presence but carried on working regardless.

"My name is Jahar Sen. I work at Ace, and I need you, Ms. Shabana Begum, to tell me what exactly you saw happen to Aniket Basu on Kayastapara bridge the night he disappeared," he said, sitting on the chair beside the severely paralyzed gentleman.

"There are CCTV cameras in this building," Shabana whispered.

"The generator here can only keep ten fans, eight tube lights, and two refrigerators functional. You know, like any normal morning in rural India, we're having a power cut now, right? Oh, and the cameras in the hall, this room is opposite to, are dummies anyway," Jahar explained with a broad smile.

"How do you know?"

"Since my father's move here last month, I am the biggest patron of this place, and the administrative staff have let me in on how things are run here."

"Why here of all the good care homes in the city?"

"He wants to remain close to his ancestral home, a few miles away from this town. I have inherited the love for villages from him. Sometimes when I am not working I drive around the remote parts of this state to explore them. Beauty! Now ... I ask the questions. You answer."

"What will I get for answering you?" asked Shabana, deadpan.

"How much do you expect?"

"Not a penny less than thirty-five lakhs to be sent to my PayMe account on the internet."

"Wow. That's a bit too much, isn't it?"

"I am about to risk my daughter's future to help you. Do you think my daughter will be able to get married into a decent family after the public knows that I am somehow entangled in my employers' son's missing case? The media won't stop harassing me once they discover my identity. Some suspicious young man with a big camera was lurking around my slum yesterday."

"I am surprised that you have a PayMe account. Do you even know how to access the internet?" Jahar grinned.

"Not any less than you do. Okay ... I lied. It's not my account but my distant cousin's... He was a construction labourer. He lost his legs in an accident at a construction site. He may not live with me, but I take care of his finances for him as he has nobody else besides me."

Seventeen years old, Nisha, paced up and down the humble balcony of her aunt's flat in the city, distraught. Her arms trembled. She struggled to hide her unease from her aunt and little cousin whom she called Brother.

"When is your father's appointment with the neurologist?" her aunt asked her from the kitchen.

"Soon," she blurted out.

"Getting him the right treatment must be your sole priority now. Stay here for as long as you need to. Phone your mother and brothers and tell them that I'll be taking care of your father's medical expenses while he's here. He's my only brother."

Nisha stormed downstairs as soon as she had caught sight of her father walking towards the flat. Running up to him at the gate of the apartments' compound, she said, "Why weren't you answering your phone? I thought you had wandered off again!"

"How forgetful do you think I can become despite taking all my medications? My phone ran out of battery or I'd have called you. It has been a long day."

"Are you okay?"

"I must be okay no matter what! My only purpose of bringing you here is to help you live again. Not even your mother will ever know about what we are up to. Have you taken that homeopathy medicine for your trauma like I told you to?"

"Yeah. But when do I know if I have started healing?"

"When you can talk about what you went through without feeling ill."

"We are now live in front of the missing man's house. Nobody from his family is answering us at the moment..." shouted a reporter into her microphone, standing against a discoloured two-storey building in a middle-class neighbourhood at Kayastapara. One of the two cameramen was filming her narrating the Aniket Basu missing case for a Youtube channel. "Aniket Basu, 28 years of age," she unfolded, "had booked a bike on Ace app at eight-thirty in the evening, a little less than seven weeks ago, on the twentieth of November. He had to go to the doctor's office with his parents' medical reports by 9 p.m. His parents were both recovering from dengue fever at that time. The ride arrived at their door ... right here ... within five minutes of being booked. His parents last saw him leave in a brown tee shirt and a pair of grey jeans, carrying a blue backpack. When Aniket didn't return home or call his parents after two hours had gone by, his father went out to look for him. The shops had closed, and the roads were empty."

The other cameraman was occupied with recording the key areas around the house where the young man was last seen.

"Aniket Basu 's father, Ajay Basu, had gone all the way up to the bridge at the end of the long lane connecting his house with the main road," she continued, "and stood waiting there for his son to show up while constantly trying to reach him on phone. The doctor's office Aniket was supposed to go to was three miles away from the other end of the bridge. Aniket's mother, Kaberi Basu, rang up the doctor's office only to be told that they had closed an hour ago and that the doctor suddenly cancelled all his appointments for that evening since he was at a hospital performing a surgery which was taking longer than expected. Aniket's parents saw that his last location was somewhere in the middle of the bridge, according to Google map that the family used to track each other's location whenever they were apart.

Receiving no help from the police, Mr. and Mrs. Basu started social media campaigns promising five lakh rupees to anybody who can find them their son. At first, the couple were misled by a string of scammers who falsely claimed to have spotted Aniket after the twentieth of November. Then the parents helplessly contacted Dilip Sinha who's a retired editor of a daily national newspaper, *Kalbadol*, and also a professor at the college Aniket graduated from. He intervened in the matter by using his influence to bring the story of Aniket's disappearance to wider attention. The police, feeling great pressure from the print and electronic media houses, started working on the case — Aniket's cell phone call details and internet browser history were looked into, Aniket's friends, the shopkeepers and residents of the buildings on the route Aniket had presumably taken were questioned, the available CCTV footages of the entire southern part of the city checked, the Ace biker identified and interrogated, the manager of Ace's branch office in the state contacted — until they came to a dead end.

None of the locals who may have witnessed something from their homes or shops at that time of the night are coming forward to tell the police anything substantial. However, according to sources, the CCTV footages from a couple of functioning traffic cameras show that there was nobody going up or down the bridge except a veiled woman who had ascended the bridge from Circular Park around the time, at about ...

8:40 p.m., the bike, with Aniket on the passenger seat behind the biker, drove up the bridge from Kayastapara. But the outdoor camera of a shop across the bridge confirms that only the biker was descending the bridge, at Circular Park, on his bike at 8:42 p.m.; the passenger seat was empty. A flight of stairs going down the midway of the bridge leads to a slum which the police have combed through for information on Aniket in vain. The number of the bike seen on the CCTV footages has helped the police find its driver and his criminal record out in no time. It turns out that there was an FIR filed against this unnamed biker, about five years ago, by the family of a disabled child who he had allegedly sexually harassed in an empty school van on his way back from school when he worked as a school van driver. But, there's no evidence that he has harmed Aniket. ... The biker has repeatedly told the police that when they approached the middle of the bridge he had to stop the bike for a few seconds, on Aniket's instruction, and let him dismount it before driving off ahead alone. The police can't corroborate his statement as there's no functioning traffic camera on the bridge."

"So far, just the police, Ace's branch manager, and I know about you and your professional relationship with the family. Now I am not sure if a corrupt police officer has leaked confidential information about this case to someone from the press, which is common. We need to act fast!" Jahar informed Shabana.

"A couple of days ago, some mysterious woman paid for all my groceries at the marketplace after randomly striking up a chat with me about the weather," said Shabana, standing by the open door of the patient's room, making sure nobody could eavesdrop on their conversation. "Then, as I was about to walk away from her, she whispered to me that she could give me as much money as I needed if I told the police and, later the media, that I had seen the biker attack Aniket Basu on the bridge that night, no matter what the truth was. Obviously I denied to do her the favour!"

"What did she look like?"

"Like any upper middle-class working woman looks like, but that one had conjoined eyebrows."

"Snehal Sinha. She has thick conjoined eyebrows. She was really skinny when I last saw her," he murmured.

"Yeah, that woman was thin like a matchstick. How do you know her?"

"I recently looked into Kalbadol's Dilip Sinha's background. He has a niece who works at Ryde, Ace's rival. Snehal is the niece, but she has no presence on social media. Ryde is a ride-sharing company like Ace. It was founded by her long time partner. I have always known why your employer's acquaintance, Dilip Sinha, the retired editor, is so interested in this case."

"You are here just to clear Ace of being responsible for what may have befallen Aniket Basu up on that bridge. Am I not right?"

"Thirty lakhs for you once you tell me what you've seen happen to Aniket up on Kayastapara bridge that night. Then I need you to go to the police station and tell them the same."

"Is this being recorded?"

"Obviously, yes."

"What if I tell you that the biker stopped the bike and started to attack Aniket?"

"Why would he do that?"

"I don't know. For money, what else?"

"This is exactly what Snehal wanted you to say! Why did you miss the first opportunity to get rich? She was going to throw money at you for saying to the world what you are telling me now."

"Well, maybe I don't want money in exchange for lying."

"So tell me what you witnessed on the bridge the night Aniket Basu went missing."

"Get away from there! One of the media persons might notice you!" Ajay Basu whispered to his wife who couldn't stop peeking outside through the blinds of their living room window.

"Are you scared of anything?" Kaberi whispered, turning the volume of their television up.

"Of course, I am. I wonder if Ani is okay. He never told us where he'd be staying!"

"I'm sure he is fine. This nightmare will be over very soon. I can feel it."

"How can you trust Shabana? Do you know how infuriated I was when I discovered dried out red spots of chicken pox all over her hands? She would have never disclosed to us that she had been undergoing treatment for chicken pox if I didn't unexpectedly catch her scratching her arms in the kitchen when she must have thought that none of us was around! I should have posted about it with pictures of her arms on my social media account to put an end to her work life then and there. She could have infected us all! You were a fool to trust her to take care of the household chores while we were confined to the bed with dengue."

"She swore by God that she'd play her part in Ani's plan of disappearing himself."

"God?"

"She knows that I'll be complaining against her recklessness to the agency she gets work through if she makes any mistake in front of the Ace employee today. However ... she has been quite punctual in getting on the bridge the night Ani executed his plan."

"How did Ani come up with a plan like this? When did he conceive it?"

"He's like you! He's always thinking about how to earn money. He just needed someone to perform a crucial role in his disappearance act, and he instantly decided to blackmail Shabana into agreeing to play the part of the witness in it, just when we were about to kick her out. Don't talk like you know nothing about it!"

"I should have stopped Ani from committing this level of fraud. The fever had weakened my ability to think things through, and I was also desperate for the thirty lakh rupees Mr. Ghosh had demanded for securing Ani a government job. I have invested too much money into the new building... Do you think Dilip Sinha suspects us?"

"No, but it doesn't matter if he does. He has his own motive for turning the public against Ace. We're the ones using him, according to Ani's plan. Unless Shabana opens her mouth, nobody can prove a thing against us."

Mrs. Basu's phone lit up with a notification: Thirty lakh rupees had just been deposited to Shabana's cousin's Payme account from an account possibly belonging to Jahar. She immediately logged into the account controlled by Shabana and transferred the entire sum of money to her own. The couple gazed at each other in disbelief over the quick success of their son's plan.

"I'll have to phone Shabana later to tell her that she can change the password to her cousin's account as we won't be needing it anymore," said the overjoyed wife.

"Ani promised us that he'll be back once he finds out that Shabana's statement has reached the media. Should we call Jahar Sen and.."

"No! He told us not to panic unless his absence continues for more than a week following the transaction between Jahar and Shabana. We should wait."

A couple of hours after his meeting with the CEO of Ace, Jahar slunk off to Club Indigo. It was about forty minutes past midnight. He unlocked the club's main entrance with his key and promptly locked the door behind him upon entering the two-storey building in a secluded locality. A long corridor along the dancefloor gave on to a clothes rack behind which was a door camouflaged with purple paint covering the walls of the building. Only Jahar knew how to open that door which led to a secret self-contained soundproof room.

"Where's your wig?" he snarled at Aniket, seeing him lying on a tattered mattress on the floor of the dimly illuminated secret room full of cardboard boxes and wooden crates apart from the basic bathroom fixtures. "Didn't I tell you that you must always be here in the disguise you had donned on that dark staircase of Kayastapara bridge?"

The frail man sprung up. "Nobody comes in this filthy hole with poor ventilation! People on the other side can't even hear me banging on the door."

"Nobody saw you enter this club on the evening of twentieth November, right?"

"Of course not. Why would you ask me that? You were here yourself in the empty club to open the door for me and let me hide in this dump."

"Yeah, you're right. Although it was Thursday, I still had to make sure that there was nobody else in or around this building besides you and I."

"It must be Thursday today since you're here."

"It is. The only day this club is closed."

"When can I go home?"

"Why do you want to escape this little heaven I have created for you?"

"I am terrified to sleep here all by myself. No phone, no internet, no television... I had to switch off my phone on that bridge, destroy the SIM card, and throw the device into the river before coming here. I have no entertainment now!"

"I have stocked up the washbasin shelf with enough ready-to-eat foods that should last at least another month. You're getting drinking water through the taps here twice a day. You can't ask for more, you know? Yesterday I paid your parents thirty lakh rupees through that caregiver's cousin's online banking account, just as you had planned! She has delivered all her dialogues well, thanks to your mentoring! Of course, she said a few things out of our script, like, she mentioned that your professor's niece tried to use her to harm Ace's reputation further."

"Am I free now? You're benefitting from our plan more than I am!"

"I am doing this for a promotion at Ace, and you for the money. Ace's CEO, Reba Singhania, is so proud of me now... That bitch! I had to plead with her to let me talk to the witness. She was sending another employee to do the job!"

"Shabana wouldn't say her lines to anyone else but you. Blackmailing her didn't really work. I had to convince her that you're the big guy who owed me thirty lakhs. She thought she was doing a good deed for me."

"Now Reba believes that I have browbeaten the witness to speak in favour of Ace! It has all happened the way I wanted, you know. I went to meet Shabana at the care home you told me about, recorded her conversation with me, and sent it to Reba. That bitch, Reba, couldn't stop saying to me over the phone call how touched she was to learn from the recording that I have spent thirty lakhs from my own account to bribe the witness for the sake of Ace. Still she won't return me to my former position at work!"

"Did Shabana go to the police station afterwards to give them a statement pro Ace?"

"Yes, and I anonymously sent a tip to the media about Shabana. That poor woman's throat must be aching now, having to repeat her statement to different journalists all day," Jahar giggled. "You know, my healthy father has sacrificed the luxuries of his house to live in that run-down care home where Shabana has been working for a long time so that nobody can ever doubt me for going there."

"So, he knows all about our plan?"

"No! I am the only one who knows you're here. Would you let your folks know about this hidey-hole if I had told you in advance that I was going to keep you here?"

"No. They didn't know that I was coming to this club to meet you in disguise that night. I have been faithful to you."

"Good. Thanks!"

"I could have never guessed that you'd be locking me up here! I just thought you'd take me somewhere else from here, somewhere more comfortable."

"I am sorry."

"Did the police ever come here in search of me?"

"Yes. They just asked the bouncers and dancers questions about you. They questioned me too. I told them that I may have talked to you a few times like I talk to all the clubbers. They didn't think anything of it. It's not like we ever added each other on social media! It seems none of the regulars here found out about you and I remaining in the club way past its open hours, sometimes till the early mornings, to hatch the plot. You know, I was smart enough to destroy both the CCTV cameras in this building, right after we had this planned out, over a month before your disappearance. When the police asked for last month's footages, I simply said that I have been too busy to get the dead cameras replaced with new ones."

"You're supposed to set me free once you've impressed your boss by getting the sole witness' statement which absolves your company of any crime against me."

"The biker who drove you up the bridge is a paedophile, and everyone knows about it now. You have no idea how much this hurts the company!"

"So, it's my fault for not imagining that the random driver who'd become a part of our plan might turn out to be a paedophile!"

"No. But I can't let you out until I am able to fix this issue somehow. I am afraid you will have to be the bad guy for a while if you want to see the sun again."

"Three years ago, at 9 p.m on 3rd November, mother sent me out to wait for you when you weren't coming home after your work at the pharmacy was over. We were worried you had wandered off in delirium. You weren't taking your medications because you refused to accept your newly diagnosed disease. At that time there was a bridge being constructed near the highway to the city. So, some cars going to and from the city took the long route around the farmland near our place. I was walking along the isolated road at that hour of the night, against mother's wishes. A car going past me ... in my direction suddenly ... came to a stop in front of me, blocking my way. Then," she panted, "the driver got

off the car and ... came up to me. Intoxicated, he asked me what I was up to and I told him that I was looking for you. He said, "Why don't you get into my car? It's not safe to walk alone in this dark." He had grabbed my arm so tight... When I tried to free myself from his grip, he dragged me into his car. I couldn't shout because he had almost smothered me with his palm. Then he tried to rape me. I fought back with all my strength, but he ended up knocking me off with a blow to my head."

"Stop!" cried her father. "You're covered in sweat! Don't do this to yourself!"

"Are you going to report it to the police? Are you going to let me see a psychiatrist?"

"Just lie down and try to feel normal again. Your aunt and cousin may be back from the market any minute now!"

"You and mother fear that nobody will marry me once they learn that it wasn't you who beat me up for going out at night but a stranger who tried to rape me in his car!"

"Do you have any idea what pain I felt that ill-fated night when I had to carry your unconscious body to the nearest hospital and beg the staff there on my knees for over an hour to get a doctor for you? You can never imagine the guilt that overpowers me any time I think of how I had been sauntering in madness just a stone's throw away from where you were being attacked, and I couldn't protect you! I regained my memories only when I watched you being tossed out of the car, right in front of my eyes, before it sped away! You want to go to the police? If the judicial system of our nation was any reliable, my cousin Shefali's rapists wouldn't be out living it up after destroying her life and incapacitating her father by beating him up so that the poor man can never fight for her justice!"

"What more do I have to do to be free from this prison?" Aniket pierced into Jahar's eyes.

"I have done my research on you and your family before using you. I have strong evidence of your father's unlawful activities that involve accepting bribes at his workplace, illegally constructing buildings at a few locations in the city, and threatening to murder an old lady who had recently objected to a wall he was erecting on a part of her land. Even the house that you live in with your family has an illegal balcony. I know with what money your father bought you a car which, God knows why, you stopped driving not too long ago."

"I just prefer walking long distances to stay in shape."

"But, it's your predatory behaviour with women I am interested in."

"Did someone say anyth..."

"I know what kind of women attracts you. I am trying to get your last victim to disclose to the media how you had forced yourself on her."

"You can't do that to me after what I have been sacrificing to help you level up at work!"

“I need to distract the public with your crime against the woman so that the flaw in Ace’s hiring process is forgotten, or the company will keep suffering. Just wait a few more days, and you’ll be free again.”

Enraged, Aniket pounced on Jahar, without a second thought, attempting to strangle him in vain. Jahar, throwing him to the ground, shouted, “We’re not friends just because we have had a few drinks together in the last couple of years. I am still the owner here!”

The afternoon Shabana Begum went viral on the internet with her statement supporting Ace, Nisha, her father, and Brother were out admiring the sights and sounds of the busy streets. Brother was showing them some of his favourite places including a historical café, a newly constructed shopping mall, and a park which was home to a variety of birds. At the end of the day, they found themselves buying ice-creams from a confectionery store facing a big piece of grassy land — the play ground behind Ace headquarters — where a group of children were playing.

“Before my exams, I used to come here to play cricket. It’s a little far away from home,” said Brother, licking his ice-cream bar.

“We can go home now if you want to,” said Nisha’s father, concerned.

Staring at the land, Nisha requested her father to let her feet touch the grass of the playground.

“Please... I just want to feel like the athlete that I used to be.”

“You still are,” remarked Brother.

Crossing the road, the two teenagers went over to the field while the sexagenarian stood observing them from the store.

The sun was about to set. Only Nisha and Brother couldn’t stop playing catch with a weighty rubber ball that they had managed to borrow from one of the kids there. Nisha enthusiastically threw the ball higher and farther, aiming to make it extremely difficult for Brother to catch it, at every chance she had got. The boy cheered her for her effort despite being unable to catch the ball as it lobbed over his head each time.

The match went on until the last ball hurled by Nisha flew beyond the playground and hit Jahar Sen, coming towards them from the other side of the high-rise that hid the main road, straight on his chest. Realizing the gravity of the incident, Nisha and Brother, along with some of the players, rushed to his aide. Jahar had dropped to the ground, trembling, gasping for breath, and holding his chest tight. His condition began worsening when he made out Nisha’s face as she stood by him.

Nisha couldn’t have ever known the identity of the monster, who believed that he had killed her, if she didn’t see the televised footage of Jahar Sen, at a press conference, denying Ace’s connection with Aniket Basu’s disappearance. She instantly recognised Sen as her assailant, and, with the help of her father, she secretly devised the only way to get justice for herself. For Nisha to carry out her revenge attack on Jahar, the elderly man just had to observe his daily movements to learn that he came out

through the back door of the Ace headquarters at about six in the evening for a smoke break near the playground almost every day.

Her father made his way through the crowd, that had hemmed the dying man in, to get a better view of his daughter's rapist suffering. "Why don't you both go to the headquarters and get some help for this man?" he said to Nisha and Brother. Looking at the unfamiliar faces around him, he shouted, "Does anybody have a phone? Mine's out of battery! Someone dial the emergency number!"

Two months later, Nisha and her father left her aunt's place in a rickshaw to take a train homeward. Nisha looked radiant. Jahar Sen had passed away in the hospital after battling death for a little over a week following the attack on him. The police ruled his death as an accident after extensively interrogating everyone – including Nisha, her father, and her cousin – who was at and near the playground around the time Jahar Sen was fatally injured by a ball.

The rickshaw couldn't move ahead upon coming to a byroad where a group of people surrounded Aniket Basu's mother. Apparently deranged by no information on her missing son's whereabouts, the middle-aged woman was out with a photograph of him, imploring the passers-by to find him somehow.

"For weeks, even before bringing me to the city, you had subtly followed the bastard around like a shadow when he was trying to save his company's face. By any chance, do you know anything about the missing man that the public don't?" Nisha whispered to her father who, at that moment, began to grow more inscrutable than ever.